

Israeli gunfire wounds five in West Bank

BIRZEIT: The Palestinian Red Crescent said Israeli troops shot and wounded five people on Tuesday at a university in the occupied West Bank, while the military said its forces fired to break up a violent confrontation.

Military vehicles entered the campus of Birzeit University late in the morning, according to several witnesses who spoke and whose accounts were confirmed by the institution's president Talal Shahwan.

Videos posted to social media showed the intervention, while journalists saw several military vehicles leave the campus, escorted by Israeli soldiers on foot.

The Israeli military said it intervened to disperse an “anticipated gathering in support of terror” that was about to take place at the university, according to “intelligence indications” it received.

The military said that a “violent confrontation broke out... during which rocks were hurled from rooftops in the area toward the forces”.

“The forces responded with riot dispersal means and precise fire toward the main violent individuals,” the military added.

The Red Crescent said 11 people were wounded in total, including five from live ammunition, four through gas inhalation, and two as a result of falls.

The university's communications department said that students had thrown stones at the troops, adding that all of the wounded were students.

A journalist saw ambulances take away several people.

“Unfortunately, the university has been a recurring target, but this time the brutality crossed all limits,” Shahwan said in a news conference.

Israeli forces had previously entered the campus several times.—AFP

Maduro’s lawyer previously defended WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange

NEW YORK: The lawyer defending deposed Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro is a veteran trial attorney who previously represented WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Barry Pollack, 61, appeared beside Maduro during his arraignment in a New York courtroom on Monday on drug trafficking and other charges.

Maduro pleaded not guilty, and it will be up to Pollack to try to convince a federal jury to render that verdict when the case eventually goes to trial.

The next hearing has been set for March 17.

A graduate of Georgetown University law school, Pollack is a partner in Harris St. Laurent & Wechsler LLP, a boutique New York law firm, and a former president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

Law firm research guide Chambers USA describes him as a “thorough and deep-thinking lawyer” who “lives, breathes and sleeps trials, and has such a natural way in front of juries.”

In 2024, Pollack secured the release of Assange from a British prison after negotiating a plea deal with the US Justice Department that saw the Australian plead guilty to violating the Espionage Act by unlawfully disclosing national defense material.

In another high-profile case, Pollack obtained the acquittal of a former Enron accountant who was facing criminal fraud charges stemming from the collapse of the energy giant.

Another prominent case involved a New York man who was wrongfully convicted of murdering his parents when he was a teenager and spent 17 years in prison.—AFP

Republicans accused of ‘whitewashing’ Capitol attack

WASHINGTON: Five years after the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, Democrats in Congress accused Republicans of a “whitewash” of history while President Donald Trump delivered an upbeat speech to Republican lawmakers that made little mention of the riot by his supporters.

The contrasting events laid bare the balance of power in Washington. Democrats sought to revive memories of the attack, in which thousands of Trump supporters sent lawmakers scrambling for their lives in an unsuccessful attempt to overturn his defeat in the 2020 election.

Trump, meanwhile, delivered jokes and danced to his signature song, “YMCA,” at an iconic performing arts venue in Washington named for former President John F. Kennedy, which his administration has now renamed the “Trump-Kennedy Center.”

Trump delivered a campaign-style speech to House Republicans, who last year shepherded his tax and spending cuts through the Republican-controlled Congress.

In an 82-minute speech, he briefly mentioned the riot, criticising a congressional investigation and news coverage of the attack. —Reuters

Yemen’s separatists send delegation to Riyadh for talks

Tourists stranded on island to leave today

DUBAI: The leader of Yemen's separatists is heading to Riyadh on Tuesday for talks, a Yemeni official said, after days of fighting between his pro-Saudi rivals.

The Saudi-organised talks indicate the beginning of de-escalation efforts after the clashes in Yemen's government-run areas that exposed a rift in Gulf power, Saudi Arabia.

“A large delegation headed by the president of the Southern Transitional Council, Aidaros Alzubidi, will travel to Riyadh this evening at the official invitation of Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman,” the STC official said, requesting anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Alzubidi will also “discuss the southern dialogue sponsored by Riyadh”, the official said.

Saudi Arabia had called for talks between the Yemeni factions in Riyadh at the request of Yemen's government, with both camps agreeing to take part.

In December, the separatists seized large swathes of territory, including much of Hadramawt province bordering Saudi Arabia, expelling Saudi-backed government forces.

But last week, air strikes from a Saudi-led coalition and a counter-offensive on the ground pushed

back the separatists.

The Saudis and Emiratis, both wealthy oil-producers and neighbours, have long supported rival factions in Yemen's fractious government, which is based in the country's south.

They had initially joined forces in the Saudi-led military coalition against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who forced out the government in 2014 and seized much of the country's north.

Gunfire near Yemen's Aden

Gunfire was heard in the vicinity of the Al-Maashiq presidential palace in the southern Yemeni port city of Aden, witnesses said on Tuesday.

Security sources said anti-aircraft guns were activated to target unidentified drones in the airspace over the palace.

No further information was immediately available.

Aden, along with areas near the port city, is currently controlled by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC). The leader of the STC had been residing in the palace, but his current whereabouts are unknown.

Tuesday's developments come amid efforts to end a conflict between the separatists and Yemen's Saudi-backed internationally recognised government, which erupted last month.

The conflict has triggered a major feud between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, fracturing a coalition created to fight the Iran-aligned



TOURISTS gather for a group photo under a dragon blood tree in Yemen's Socotra Island.—Reuters



NEW YORK CITY: Mayor Zohran Mamdani addresses a news conference at the police headquarters. Others in the picture are (left to right) police officials Michael LiPetri and Jessica Tisch, and Governor Kathy Hochul.—AFP

7 killed in clashes between Syrian govt and Kurd forces

Turkiye says all Kurdish groups must disarm

DAMASCUS/ANKARA: Clashes between government personnel and Kurdish-led forces in the north Syrian city of Aleppo killed at least seven people on Tuesday, mostly civilians, with both sides trading blame over who started the fighting.

The implementation of a March deal to merge the Kurds' semi-autonomous administration and military into Syria's new Islamist government has stalled, and tensions occasionally erupt into clashes, particularly in Aleppo, which has two Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods.

On Tuesday morning, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said in a statement that groups affiliated with the government “targeted the Sheikh Maqsud neighbourhood with a reconnaissance drone”, resulting in “the death of one resident”.

It later said the toll had risen to three civilians including two women in “indiscriminate artillery and missile shelling carried out by factions of the Damascus government” on the Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafiyeh districts. “The shelling is still ongoing, with the use of drones... direct sniper fire and heavy-weapon fire,” the SDF statement said.

Aleppo's Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafiyeh neighbourhoods have remained under the control of Kurdish units linked to the SDF, despite Kurdish

fighters agreeing to withdraw from the areas in April.

In a statement carried by state news agency SANA, the defence ministry said the SDF targeted “a number of neighbourhoods in Aleppo city adjacent to the districts it controls”.

“The ongoing attacks have resulted in three dead and more than 12 wounded among civilians,” it said, also reporting one dead in an attack on an army position.

“The SDF is again proving that it does not recognise the March 10 agreement and is trying to undermine it,” the statement added.

Stalled talks

The SDF controls large swathes of Syria's oil-rich north and northeast, and with the support of a US-led international coalition, was integral to the territorial defeat of the militant Islamic State group in Syria in 2019.

Its integration into the state following the ouster of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad a year ago has proven complicated, and the original March agreement was supposed to be implemented by the end of 2025.

The SDF also accused factions affiliated with Syria's army of attacking the town of Deir Hafer, around 50 kilometres east of Aleppo, and near the strategic Tishreen Dam to the city's northeast. The Kurdish-led force affirmed its right to “respond legitimately to these attacks”.

On Sunday, SDF chief Mazloun Abdi held further talks with offi-

cials in Damascus on integrating the Kurdish-led forces, but state media said no tangible results were achieved.

The Kurds have repeated calls for decentralisation — which Syria's new Islamist authorities have rejected.

Last month in Aleppo, deadly clashes killed five people, in violence that came after Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan of Turkey — a close ally of the new authorities — urged the SDF during a visit to Damascus not to be an obstacle to Syria's stability.

Kurds must lay down weapons

Turkiye's defence minister on Tuesday demanded that all Kurdish armed groups — “including in Syria” — lay down their weapons.

“The PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) and all affiliated groups must immediately cease all terrorist activity in regions where they are present, including in Syria, and lay down their weapons without condition,” Yasar Guler said in Ankara.

In May, the PKK formally renounced its decades-long armed struggle against the Turkish state, ending a conflict that claimed tens of thousands of lives.

“We will not allow any terrorist organisation — particularly the PKK, the PYD, the YPG, and the SDF — to establish a foothold in the region,” he added, referring to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and its main element, the People's Protection Units (YPG).—AFP

Govt mulls fuel levy hike to aid gas sector

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responded that the committee would be formally briefed on the matter, but did not deny the proposal.

The minister said a detailed report on gas circular debt, prepared under IMF conditions, had already been submitted to the cabinet committee on energy (CCoE), adding that the flow of fresh circular debt in the gas sector has been “quelled” which was critical a reform measure.

Sui gas companies' managing directors presented data showing operational improvements. Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Ltd (SNGPL) Managing Director Aamer Tufail said his company was able to reduce unaccounted-for gas (UFG) losses from 9pc to 5pc.

The Sui Southern Gas Company

(SSGC) reported that UFG losses had dropped from 17pc to 10pc and cautioned that Balochistan alone suffered annual gas losses of about Rs12 billion.

Committee member Syed Naveed Qamar argued that gas theft and losses often occur with collusion, but the minister said feeder-to-feeder monitoring had been introduced nationwide to tighten oversight.

Officials said domestic consumers were receiving enhanced gas supplies this winter. SNGPL reported that in November it supplied an additional 61 million cubic feet per day compared with last year, rising to 95 million cubic feet per day extra in December.

No domestic gas field was currently under curtailment, the minister said, adding that gas was being supplied to the power sector beyond

its indicative demand to avoid load-shedding.

The committee was told that technology based monitoring systems, including town border stations (TBS) at network tail-ends, were now generating automatic alerts in case of pressure drops, improving real-time control and service delivery.

The minister said the government was also working with the World Bank to strengthen the capacity of the Directorate General of Petroleum Concessions.

The committee chairman observed that CSR funds were not being utilised properly by the existing committee and, therefore, recommended that a new committee be formed for a transparent utilisation of funds as per the previous recommendations of the committee.

Nigeria to utilise US recon flight data to aid its own strikes

ABUJA: Nigeria's air force will take the lead from the United States after Washington's Christmas Day strikes on fighters of the militant Islamic State group, making use of US reconnaissance flights to aid its own strikes, a Nigerian official said on Tuesday.

On the evening of Christmas Day, the United States struck sites in northwest Nigeria's Sokoto state against what it said were targets linked to the Islamic State group.

Though Nigeria remains open to further American strikes, the Americans' primary role will now be providing intel, the source familiar with the new security arrangement with Washington said, asking for anonymity because of its sensitivity.

Africa's most populous country has been battling a IS militia insurgency since 2009, mostly concentrated in its northeast, while armed “bandit” gangs have taken hold across swathes of the country's rural northwest and north-central regions.

The strikes came after a diplomatic offensive starting in October in which President Donald Trump alleged that violence from armed groups in Nigeria amounted to “persecution” and “genocide” of Christians — accusations denied by Abuja and independent analysts.

Days before the strikes, Nigeria's information minister said the “spat” had been resolved, “culminating in a strengthened partnership between America and Nigeria”.

For weeks ahead of the strikes, analysts had been tracking increased US reconnaissance flights over Nigeria.—AFP

AI-powered platform to use genetic data for drug discovery

SEATTLE: Variant Bio, a private biotech firm, said on Tuesday it has launched a platform that uses artificial intelligence on genetic data to discover new drug candidates to send into human trials.

Drug developers are increasing the adoption of AI for discovery and safety trials to get faster and cheaper results, in line with a push by the US Food and Drug Administration to reduce animal testing in the near future.

Variant's Inference platform uses agentic AI — autonomous AI agents that work with minimal human intervention — to discover drugs by analyzing proprietary and public human genomic data from global studies, along with other large-scale biological datasets.

Separately, the AI discovery company also announced a multi-year research collaboration and license agreement with Boehringer Ingelheim to discover drugs for kidney disease using its Inference platform.

Under the agreement, Variant Bio will receive an upfront payment and will be eligible for potential license and milestone payments totaling over \$120 million.

Variant Bio said its Inference platform is now available to research partners and that it has collaborations with several pharmaceutical companies in deals totaling more than \$200 million.

Drugmaker Eli Lilly last year also launched an AI and machine learning platform called TuneLab to provide biotech companies access to drug discovery models trained on years of its research data.

Several other drugmakers have also announced collaborations in an effort to share proprietary data for training AI models to assist drug discovery and development.—Reuters